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Beyond the Lecture: A Flipped Approach to Paralegal Education

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Abstract

In Canada, paralegal education lacks comprehensive pedagogical research in effective instructional models. Historically, paralegal programs focus on clerical skills, neglecting higher-level legal comprehension and analytical abilities that are vital for a paralegal role in the workforce. This research addresses this gap by exploring the implementation of a flipped classroom approach in an Alberta university that offers paralegal education. This study evaluated whether a flipped classroom in a legal technology course could enhance engagement and understanding of fundamental legal principles among paralegal students, compared to lecture-based models in other previously experienced university courses. Survey data collected through a mixed methods approach in April 2024 revealed that most participants believed that the flipped classroom encouraged participation, felt more confident in applying legal concepts, and were better prepared for the workforce. By examining the impact of flipped classrooms on paralegal education, this research provides insights that can inform curriculum development, address paralegal training challenges, and ensure the acquisition of necessary competencies for success in the legal industry.

Keywords: paralegal education, flipped class, engagement, pedagogy, law

Introduction

Historically, paralegal programs have emphasized clerical skills, often overlooking the development of advanced legal comprehension and analytical abilities that are essential for today's paralegals. As innovations in legal technology—particularly in artificial intelligence—continue to reshape the profession, it is likely to expect that there will be an increasing demand for paralegals to assume more complex roles that go beyond administrative tasks. This shift underscores the need for an instructional approach that integrates both foundational skills and critical thinking capabilities to prepare paralegals for the evolving demands of the legal workforce (Dahlborg, 1997). In Canada, paralegal education lacks comprehensive pedagogical research in effective instructional models, likely due to a lack of regulation and standardization in post-secondary programs. Drawing parallels from research in the fields of education and law school pedagogy, this article will discuss the application of a flipped or blended instructional approach to a legal technology for paralegals class in an Alberta university.

Flipped or blended classrooms are a popular method of inverting the teaching process by placing students in the driver's seat of their learning, and the instructor acts as a coach or advisor, encouraging students to develop individual inquiries within a collaborative effort (Educause, 2012; Lage et al., 2000). Flipped classrooms take several forms, primarily using technologies where instructors post recorded video lectures, podcasts, or other written material online in advance of a synchronous online or in-person scheduled class (Educause, 2012; Lage et al., 2000). This allows students to use class time for the "harder work of assimilating knowledge through strategies such as problem-solving, discussion, or debates," and allows learners to explore new concepts, thereby encouraging student engagement and interaction with each other *and* their instructor (Castan & Hyams, 2017, p. 2). The flipped classroom approach used in this study involves an entirely student-centered approach, following cooperative learning teaching strategies which required students to work in groups to become experts in their respective technologies before presenting their findings to the class (Abramczyk & Jurkowski, 2020). The instructor acted as a mentor to student groups in the development of their presentations and addressed any knowledge gaps missing from student-created content.

This article explores whether implementing a flipped classroom approach into an undergraduate-level legal technology course for paralegals in Alberta generated learner engagement with fundamental legal knowledge appropriate for paralegals. By examining the impact of flipped classrooms on paralegal education, this research provides insights that can inform curriculum development, address paralegal training challenges, and ensure the acquisition of necessary competencies for success in the legal industry.

Background: Paralegal Education

Major themes seen in the legal scholarship of lawyers and law schools revolve around curricular requirements (content needed within a program to develop competent lawyers) and instructional methods (how educators can create excellent lawyers with large class sizes). Educators are adopting flipped class or blended learning approaches for the instruction of legal education—namely in legal research or foundational law courses—to increase student engagement, demonstrate research skills, and reach a wider range of students (Hyttinen & Suhonen, 2022).

In the absence of paralegal regulation in Alberta, educators and institutions do not have defined competencies for newly graduated paralegal students.

Legal scholarship is typically split into two approaches: the legal education of lawyers in law school or the legal education of legal studies majors in undergraduate programs. Both have widely different outcomes. The legal education of lawyers is meant to develop "lawyerly" skills, whereas legal studies approaches offer a more sociological point of view by making inquiries about the law and legal system of Canada (Dawson et al., 2021). Paralegal and legal assistant programs, on the other hand, teach students how to work *for* a lawyer. Many of these professionals provide a range of legal services requiring the application of legal principles and judgment with and *without* lawyer supervision (Trabucco, 2021). Curricular considerations for legal assistants and paralegals revolve almost entirely around the development of clerical skills such as written communication, transcription, and document preparation, despite the need for higher-level legal comprehension and analytical skills combined with the necessary technical skills. What results is a gap in knowledge received by legal professionals through ineffective instruction despite the workforce requiring paralegals to have these skills. Furthermore, as artificial intelligence continues to advance, there is growing concern that it will diminish the need for basic administrative skills, highlighting the need for future research to address how this technological shift will impact the profession.

Arguments denouncing Socratic and lecture-based instructional models at universities are increasingly promoting problem-based learning using blended or flipped class approaches to promote student engagement, increase lawyerly skill development, and foster a deeper understanding of legal concepts (Murchison et. al., 2022; Sankoff, 2014). However, legal instruction occurs outside of the confines of law school in paralegal and legal assistant programs, with much of the foundational material covered similar to what is taught to paralegals, with no instructional or curricular intent to develop competent lawyers. Recognizing the governance required to make curricular changes in paralegal programs, an instructional approach through flipped or blended learning might offer similar opportunities that are given to future lawyers, but with an emphasis toward developing a combined technical and legal competency for paralegals. The lack of research on the legal education of non-lawyers does a disservice to the education of paralegals by establishing challenges in fulfilling their responsibilities in the workforce.

Class Structure: The Flipped Class Approach in Legal Technology for Paralegals

The study focused on the class *LEGL 291: Legal Technology for Paralegals* (hereafter *LEGL 291*), a three-credit elective held in-person, on campus, from January to April 2024, during the Winter semester. The author was the instructor of the course. Although the course is designated for paralegal studies students, with most of the class from that program, Bachelor of Commerce students could also enroll. Twenty-three students enrolled in the course and 15 students participated in the anonymous survey. To ensure adherence to research ethics and manage potential power dynamics, the research assistant conducted discussions about the study with participants and assisted with the administration of the surveys in absence of the instructor. To further mitigate any influence on student participation or responses, the instructor did not review the survey results until after final grades were posted and submitted to the university.

The flipped class began with an instructor-led introduction advising learners that the class would be "flipped," where the students would be responsible for the creation and presentation of the course content. The co-creation of content with students aligns with cooperative learning principles; however, the course is structured as a flipped classroom. In this model, students engage with the material primarily outside of class and are responsible for posting their presentation and reference materials on the course's discussion board in advance. This allows their peers to review the content before the scheduled presentation, fostering a more engaged and informed in-class discussion.

Learners were asked to conduct presentations in groups of two to three members on a specified legal technology as "experts" on behalf of the fictional law firm "The Unreal Law Office." Their task was to become experts on a specified technology and to instruct the class about the technology in a manner that would be synonymous to the conduct of a presentation to the managing partners of a law office when seeking to adopt a new technology for the firm.

Students could choose their own groups. Once their group members were chosen, they developed a student contract which outlined their expectations in the development of the project along with meeting times and their modalities. Students were then asked to complete a worksheet indicating tasks to be completed and to delegate each task to a team member in preparation for their presentation. The instructor reviewed the contract and delegation of tasks by each group before the group was permitted to begin development on their presentation.

Technology choices were Cosmolex, Clio, Google Calendar, Gmail, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, and Google Drive (or an alternative cloud storage provider). Although not all technologies are legal-specific, many of these technologies are used in law firms for business operations; the task for students choosing a general technology was to learn how this technology could be used in a law office. Groups were asked to present a 45–60-minute presentation to the class on one of the technologies using a slide deck to be presented on a specified date chosen by the instructor. Groups were required to post their slide deck to the Course Discussion Board (forum) on the MacEwan University LMS for all students to review 24 hours prior to the presentation date.

In addition to the slide deck and class presentation, groups were asked to create a ten-question multiple-choice quiz to be sent to the instructor in advance of the presentation. The instructor posted the quiz on mêskanâs, MacEwan University's learning management system, for students to complete during the presentation time. Students were given one attempt on the quiz, and the deadline for the quiz was 11:59 PM on the date of the presentation.

Student presenters were required to demonstrate a legal application or process for the technology during their presentation, which involved creating a short "assignment" for the class. This effectively required the entire class to use each technology, despite only becoming "experts" in their own. An example of a legal application used was the creation of a calendar entry for a limitation date in Google Calendar, creating a client matter in Clio, or drafting a Statement of Claim for hosting on Cosmolex. This allowed students to combine their technical knowledge with the legal knowledge presented, or to use prior legal knowledge acquired from other courses in the program. All students were asked to complete the student-led assignment by 11:59 PM on the date of the presentation.

Shortly after each presentation, the instructor provided video debriefs linked on mêskanâs highlighting important points from each presentation and offering information or guidance on any gaps that arose to ensure accuracy and comprehension of the technology and legal concepts discussed.

Methodology

This study explored the following research question: does implementing a flipped classroom approach into an undergraduate-level legal technology course for paralegals in Alberta generate learner engagement with fundamental legal knowledge appropriate for paralegals?

At this stage in the research, the fundamental legal knowledge appropriate for paralegals in Alberta was based upon the selected competencies listed within the Canadian Law category of the Law Society of Ontario's (n.d.) entry-level paralegal competency framework, as Alberta paralegals are not regulated. Those competencies have been amended for brevity and are listed as follows:

- Demonstrates an understanding of the Canadian legal system.

- Demonstrates an understanding of procedural law and substantive law.

- Demonstrates an understanding of legal terminology.

The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods approach based upon constructivist grounded theory. Surveys were conducted anonymously and voluntarily with students enrolled in *LEGL 291* at MacEwan University through Google Forms on the last class of the semester. Both quantitative (Likert scale) and qualitative data (short answer questions) were collected and analyzed. The data was then compared to determine whether the answers confirmed or disconfirmed each other. This approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data, ensures a thorough and balanced analysis of the research question. A link to the Google Forms survey was posted on mêskanâs, for the *LEGL 291* Winter 2024 course. The research assistant also discussed the survey in class without the author present to avoid any potential conflict or bias. The data was overseen by the research assistant until final grades for *LEGL 291* were posted. At that time, the author could review the survey results. The author acknowledges imperfections in the methodology, namely the absence of a control group offering a lecture-based instructional approach to *LEGL 291*. Furthermore, a duplication of one of the Likert scale questions was included within the survey, details of which are listed in the appendix.

Findings

Of the 15 respondents (class size = 23, reflecting a 65% response rate), the findings on learner engagement and understanding of fundamental legal knowledge were mixed, highlighting the need for further research. Effort has been made to maintain the interpretation of the participants' stories from the qualitative findings (Mills et al., 2006). In the methodology, my analysis focused on three key areas: learner engagement, enhanced legal knowledge, and preference for the flipped classroom approach. These themes were identified through an examination of the qualitative and quantitative data, allowing us to explore how the flipped classroom influenced students' interactions with legal concepts, their engagement, and their overall learning preferences for a flipped classroom approach. A discussion of each theme along with the results in bar graph format are detailed below.

Learner Engagement

When asking students to compare their perceived learner engagement in a flipped classroom to a lecture-based class experienced during their studies, three respondents "strongly agreed" (5) and nine rated that they "agreed" (4) or are "neutral" (3), indicating general agreement on increased engagement with the flipped class approach (see Figure 1). Qualitative feedback highlighted the benefits of "hands-on learning" with legal technology. Despite 53% agreeing (4) or strongly agreeing (5), some respondents found the course *less engaging* and lacked confidence in peer-delivered information. While the requirement to complete assignments and quizzes encouraged participation, many felt uninvolved in presentations not their own. However, 73.7% found the flipped classroom significantly better at *encouraging* participation than their other university courses that are lecture-based. Although the term "engagement" was not defined for the respondents, the flipped classroom showed overall positive engagement through active participation with legal concepts and peer interaction.

Figure 1
Level of Engagement Responses

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree, rate your **level of engagement** with legal concepts learned in the flipped classroom instructional approach, compared to a lecture-based approach.

15 responses
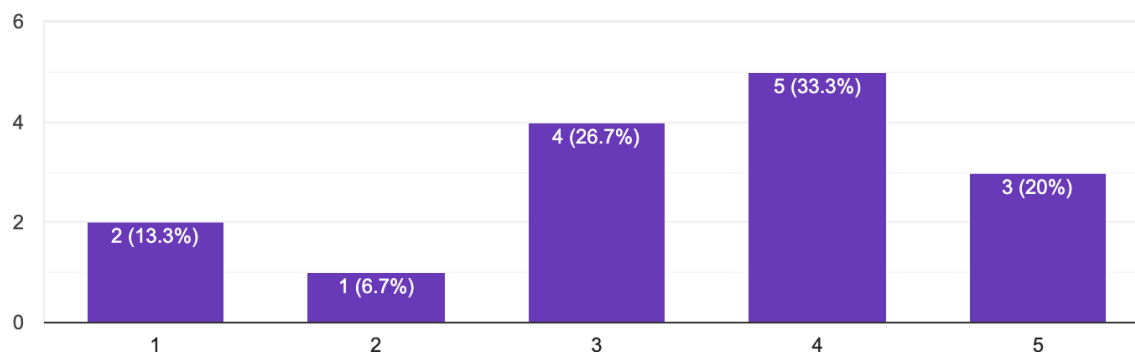
Enhanced Legal Knowledge

Responses received when asked whether this instructional approach enhanced understanding of fundamental legal knowledge compared to legal studies courses that use lecture-based approaches offered the widest variance of responses. The Likert scale of 1–5 rated a 5 as being highly effective, and a 1 as not effective at all, as Figure 2 illustrates. Three respondents (20%) indicated its ineffectiveness, and four respondents (26.7%) were neutral; however, seven respondents (46.6%) found the approach to be effective or highly effective for enhancing legal knowledge. Qualitative responses indicated learners enjoyed the application of legal concepts to specific technologies but found the application to be general in nature.

Coincidentally, over 73.4% of respondents rated they were confident (4) or very confident (5) to apply legal concepts to legal technologies, noting a feeling of being "powerful" and receiving a

"boost" in their confidence when applying legal concepts using the technologies (see Figure 3). Given the small data set and the variance in responses and respondent feedback, there are implications for future research to enhance certain processes in the flipped class structure to encourage comprehensive assessment of legal knowledge.

Figure 2
Enhanced Legal Knowledge Responses

How effective do you think the flipped classroom instructional approach was in **enhancing your understanding of fundamental legal knowledge** compared to other legal studies courses that use a lecture-based approach? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not effective at all and 5 being highly effective.

15 responses
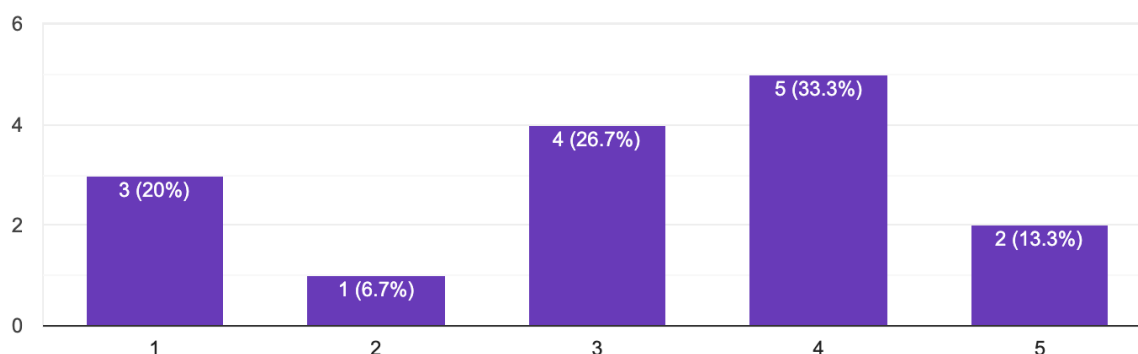
Figure 3
Confidence in Applying Legal Concepts Responses

How **confident are you in your ability to apply the legal concepts** acquired through the flipped classroom instructional approach to varied legal technologies, compared to a lecture-based model? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not confident at all and 5 being very confident.

15 responses
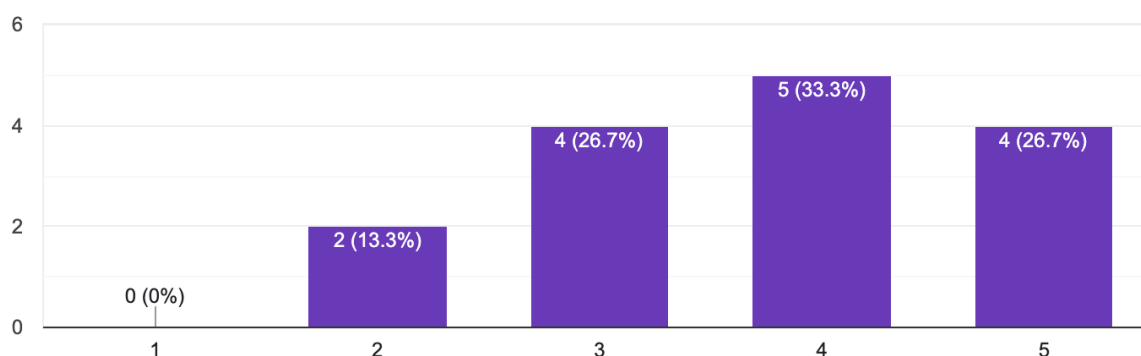
**Preference for a Flipped Classroom**

Robert Talbert (2018) argues that although students recognize the benefits of flipped class learning over time, their perspectives tend to be negative at outset and persist throughout the course. When asked about preference for a flipped classroom and its engagement with legal concepts and technologies—as shown in Figure 4—responses were varied with 53.3% of the class indicating significantly better (5) or better (4), whereas 26% noted their experience to be significantly worse (1). Respondents commented that there was a need for higher class attendance and that working in groups was stressful. One respondent felt that they "have learned nothing," and that this approach was unfair for students to be "doing all of the teaching." Others commented that they enjoyed the class, felt it encouraged participation, and enjoyed seeing the different group approaches for each presentation.

Figure 4
Preference for Flipped Classroom Responses

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being significantly worse and 5 being significantly better, rate your overall **preference for the flipped classroom** instructional approach in terms of your engagement with legal concepts and legal technologies compared to a lecture-based model.

15 responses
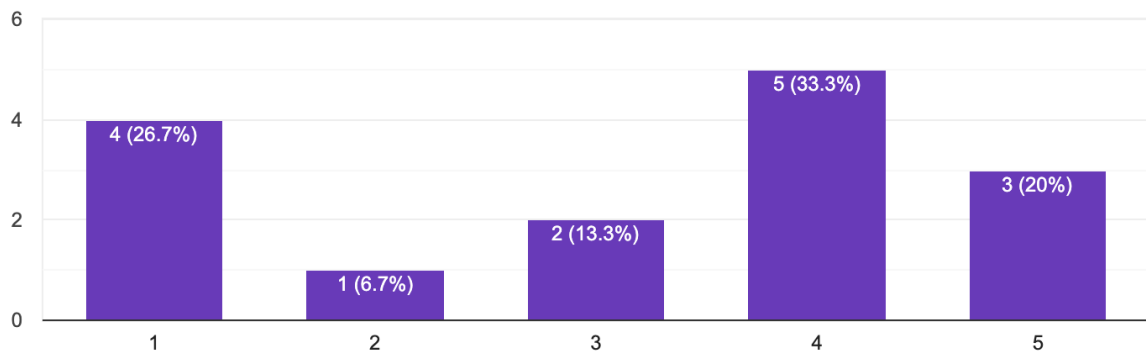
Notably, 66.7% of respondents rated significantly better (5) and better (4) when asked whether this course prepares them for the workforce compared to lecture-based models. Although respondents had mixed responses to their preference for a flipped classroom instructional approach, the responses *overwhelmingly* note that this method allowed for workplace preparation. Responses indicated the following: "it taught me about technology and as I am not sure which ones I will work with but I feel prepared now," the "legal field works are very much dependent on these technologies so basically these would really help me tackle that job in terms of diarizing," and "I hope this course better prepared me for the workforce because I can now speak confidently about real legal software systems."

Qualitative responses considered the importance of collaboration and compromise and an increase in confidence in the use of legal technologies. In one instance, a group breakdown occurred, and the respondent reflected the following:

> I had a horrible team work experience in this class and was left after they had completed no portion of the project with no explanation. This provided a realistic example of how life happens, people don't get along, or sometimes you will have to do things the way you don't want to. I had to pivot how I had planned the project and it helped me learn how to explain concepts in multiple ways. I learned to incorporate videos, check lists, and other resources to work on my communication with others. It taught me patience and that people put a range of effort into things and I'm working on being okay with that.

Interestingly, and although not the focus of the overall research question, 40% of respondents indicated that the flipped class method was "significantly better" (5) in supporting neurodiversity in the classroom, an aspect warranting further consideration.

Conclusion

Although based on a small dataset with mixed results, the response from this study highlights a clear need for further development of paralegal-specific pedagogy. One respondent noted, "I think more courses should be taught for paralegals and less lawyer centric approach some of the assignments they give us are for lawyers on law students," further emphasizing the need for paralegal-specific instructional approaches. Notably, the students who found this approach valuable were those who attended class regularly. In contrast, those who chose not to attend on student-led presentation dates found the class to be ineffective. There is opportunity to explore flipped classroom or cooperative learning approaches that effectively enable learners to demonstrate their knowledge of both substantive and procedural law along with essential technical skills. This combination is crucial for adequately preparing students for their roles in the workforce as paralegals, particularly in an era of rapid technological innovation. Future research should focus on refining flipped classroom methods and assessing its long-term impact on developing workplace competencies for paralegals.

Appendices

Find attached a frequency distribution of the Likert scale responses along with a list of the quantitative questions used in the Google Forms survey.

Author's Contributions

All analysis and writing of this paper were completed solely by the author. The literature review and prospectus were prepared by the author, but a discussion of the study with the participants and conduct of surveys was conducted by the research assistant, Tyra Zaguirre, to avoid any potential power dynamics as the author was the instructor of the legal technology course in this study.

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Artificial Intelligence Declaration

The author acknowledges the assistance of ChatGPT 4.0 and Microsoft Copilot for refining sentence structure and generating alt text for Figure 5. The prompts did not disclose study results; all outputs were extensively modified and replaced with the author's research findings and grounded in the literature cited in the references section.

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Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was obtained for this research through the MacEwan University Research Ethics Board.

Conflict of Interest

The author does not declare any conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Although the data was received via anonymous survey, the low number of qualitative responses could reveal the identities of respondents. The researcher may be able to share data that has not already been shared through conference proceedings or within this paper, upon request.

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Appendix

Figure 5
Frequency Distribution of Likert Scale Responses

Frequency Distribution for Likert Scale Responses
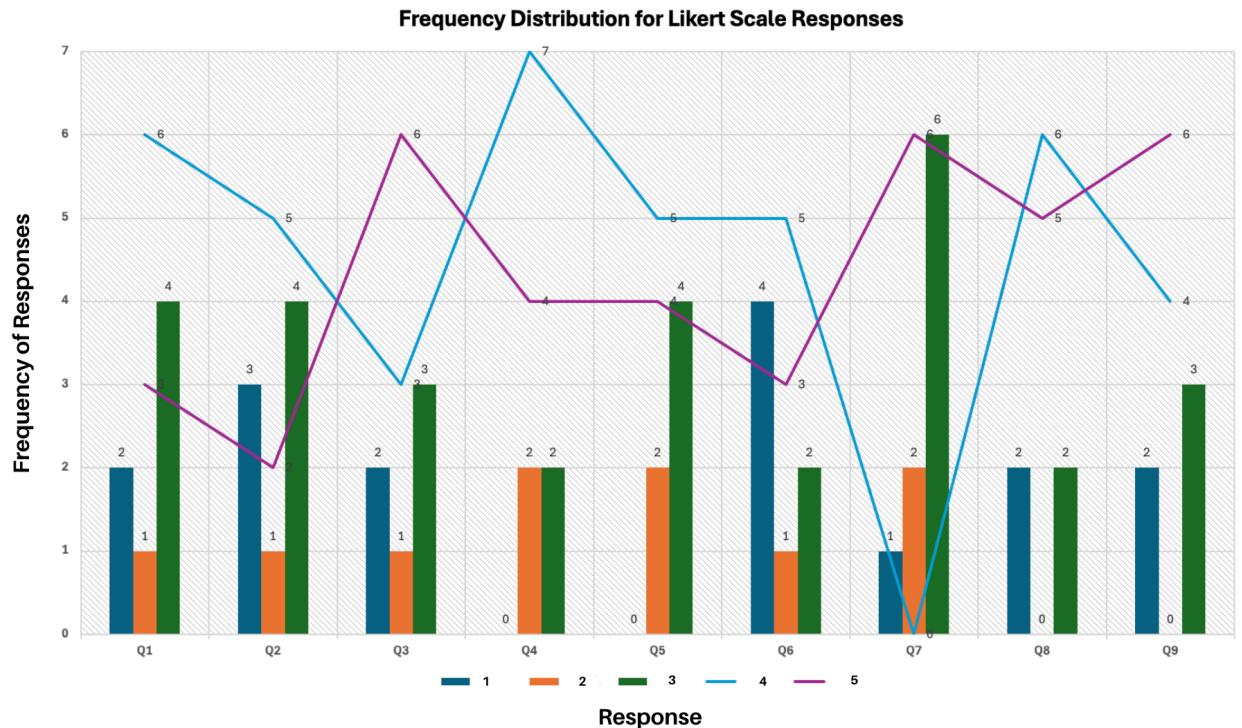
Questions

Q1: On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree, rate your **level of engagement** with legal concepts learned in the flipped classroom instructional approach, compared to a lecture-based approach.

Q2: How effective do you think the flipped classroom instructional approach was in **enhancing your understanding of fundamental legal knowledge** compared to other legal studies courses that use a lecture-based approach? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not effective at all and 5 being highly effective.

Q3: To what extent do you feel that the flipped classroom instructional approach **promotes active participation and interaction** with legal knowledge and its application to technology, compared to a lecture-based model? Rate on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not at all and 5 being to a great extent.

Q4: How **confident are you in your ability to apply the legal concepts** acquired through the flipped classroom instructional approach to varied legal technologies, compared to a lecture-based model? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not confident at all and 5 being very confident.

Q5: How **confident are you in your ability to apply the legal concepts** acquired through the flipped classroom instructional approach to varied legal technologies, compared to a lecture-based model? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not confident at all and 5 being very confident.[1]

Q6: On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being significantly worse and 5 being significantly better, rate your overall **preference for the flipped classroom** instructional approach in terms of your engagement with legal concepts and legal technologies compared to a lecture-based model.

Q7: On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being significantly worse and 5 being significantly better, rate how this course **supports neurodiversity** in the classroom.

Q8: On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being significantly worse and 5 being significantly better, rate how this course **encourages participation between students** compared to your other courses (if applicable).

Q9: On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being significantly worse and 5 being significantly better, rate how you feel this course **prepares you for the workforce** compared to other courses using a lecture-based instructional approach.

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[1] The author recognizes the duplicate question error in Q4 and Q5. Results were similar in both responses as respondents noted the duplication.